

AGRARIAN MOVEMENT IN ASSAM UP TO 1935

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Before the passing of the Assam Tenancy Act of 1935 which marked a turning point in the history of the land tenure system in Assam, tenants had no remedy against the

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In preparing this article, the author had consultations with the Late Ganga Ram Choudhury, the then General Secretary of the Assam Talatiya Ryot Sabha, who not only furnished useful information on the subject but also handed over to me his personal Diary pertaining to the movement. I have also utilized the issues of the journal Assamiya (1918-1949) now defunct, but once a mouth piece of Assamese people, and other old Assamese journals namely Banti, Manasni, Marmabani, Avahan, Chetna and Banhi etc., besides published works and memoirs preserved in the Library of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Gauhati.

oppression of the landholders. The Act came into being as a result of a strong movement in the shape of peasant's protest-meetings and representations made to the Government, by the peasants, seeking removal of their grievances. For understanding the historical necessity of the said movement, we are to examine the system that had been in vogue in this part of the Country during the days of Ahom Kings and the changes introduced in it by the British administrators.

Before the Burmese invasions and the Burmese invasions and the consequent occupation of certain parts of the State, Assam was ruled by the Ahoms for centuries. It was ceded to the British by the Burmese as a result of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The Burmese did not introduce any change in land administration as their chief motive was to ransack the country. Under the Ahom rulers the land constituted the absolute property of the sovereign. The 'ryots' who cultivated the land were but serfs. During their time the land tenure system was based on personal service.¹ The Ahom administration employed every adult male in the service of the State either as a labourer or a soldier. He was registered as a Paik,² and four Paiks (later three Paiks) constituted a squad, known as got. The Paiks were required to serve the government in turn, and the normal duties of an

1. Gazetteer of India, Assam State, Sibsagar District, Shillong: 1967. p.276.

2. With the exception of the nobles, priests and persons of high caste and their slaves, the whole male population between the age of fifteen and fifty were liable to render service to the State. They were known as Paiks.

absentee Paik in his village had to be performed by his Comrades. In return for his service each Paik was allowed 8 bighas of Rupit land in addition to his basti land, free of rent. Annually he had to pay rupee one for the portion of land meant for his house and garden. Any land occupied in excess of this limit was assessed at 4 annas per bigha. In addition to this, each adult Paik had to pay a poll tax of one rupee.

On the annexation of Assam, by the British, they allowed the system of land administration of the Ahoms to be continued for a few years, with the exception that the system of personal service was done away with. Each Paik or person was assessed a sum of Rs. 3/- for his homestead, paddy field and garden. In 1832 a land tax was introduced in place of the poll tax in the plain Districts. Each district was divided into Mahals which were resettled annually upto the year 1835. The system of collection of land revenue, generally done through the agency of the commission agents, viz. Choudhuries, Mauzadars and Kakatis, was not uniform. All these preliminary changes in the existing land tenure system were made by David Scott, the First Commissioner of Revenue for Assam and Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier, who ~~acted as the founder~~ ~~work of the British Rule in Assam by~~ introduced not only revenue, but also, judicial reforms of a far reaching nature.

During 1836-42, the plan of settling a circle of villages, called mouzas, with Choudhuries or Mouzadars, for a short term of years, was started. But in 1854, the system

of annual settlement was re-introduced. The rate of assessment differed from District to District. This state of affairs prevailed upto 1870 when the rate of assessment was raised in all the five Districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Lakshimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong, to rupee one per bigha for Basti land, ten annas per bigha for rupit land and eight annas per bigha for faringati land. The system of land tenure prevailing in the State except Goalpara District which was a temporarily settled, is known as the Ryotwari-system or more appropriately as Mouzadari which was introduced in Assam proper after the passing of the Bengal Government Resolution of 19th October, 1870.

The introduction of the Ryotwari system was the result of the untiring efforts of the then Commissioner of Assam, Colonal Hopkins. Under this system, Government dealt directly with the occupant cultivators and recognised no intermediate feudal class. Thus the foundation of the Ryotwari or Mouzadari system of tenure was laid. Although the aim of the Government was to eliminate the intermediate feudal class, but it could not achieve it wholly. The owners of Khirai (full revenue paying estates), Lakirai (full revenue free estate), Nisf-khirai (half revenue paying estates), continued to sub-let their lands to tenants. Under this system the

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3. In the five upper districts of Brahmaputra Valley, the Soil was divided into three main classes basti, rupit and faringati. Basti was the land on which the ryot's house stood with garden enclosures around it. Rupit was the land on which the winter crop of transplanted rice (Sali) was grown, as well as the low swampy land devoted to the cultivation of bao. The term faringati denoted the soils producing ahu or summer rice, Sugarcane, mustard oil seed and other crops: Final Reports of the All India Soil Survey Scheme - The Indian Council of Agricultural Research, 1958. Pp.56-57.

land was divided into the categories of (1) Khiraj periodic (2) Khiraj annual, (3) Nisf-Khiraj or half free revenue paying estates, (4) Lakhiraj or full revenue free estates, (5) Free Simple Grant, (6) Special Settlement, and (7) Waste Land Grant for 30 years, 45 years and 99 years, as the case may be.

Under the said Land Revenue Regulation Mouzadars were vested with certain powers of the Deputy Commissioner, for the realisation of arrears in revenue, which generally made them corrupt. They could attach moveable property of the defaulting peasants and also move the Deputy Commissioner to annul or sell their estates. The Mouzadars, of course, could not attach immovable property. Thus it can be said that the system though looked very good from the point of collection of revenue, was not so in respect of improving the condition of the peasants.

Though in Assam, except Goalpara district, there was no Zamindari system, yet, as there were some big Nisf-Khiraj estates, owner of which and the Mouzadars, for all practical purposes, acted as, or became Zamindars themselves in view of the absence of any law to protect the interests of the cultivators. They, like Zamindars, also put the cultivators to great distress. With a very few exceptions, the aim of the majority of the landholders was to derive as much benefit as possible at the cost of the tenants. The owners of ^{Dharmattar} Debottar, Pirpal and some other Brahmottar estates treated their tenants, in some cases at least, just like the

big landlords. The Parbatia Gossains, the descendants of the religious preceptors of the Ahom King, who were by far the biggest Brahmottar landholders, imposed on their tenants amounts, sometimes in cash and sometimes in kinds, in excess of the actual revenue on one pretext or the other viz. Seva, Puja, higher local rates, cost of rent receipts, grazing, etc. in accordance with the customs prevailing in Bengal. New tenants had to pay Selami, or makhchawani i.e. Nazrana or make advance payment, not to be deducted from revenue, in addition. Majority of the petty Brahmottar landholders usually followed the tactics of the Parbatia Gossains as far as possible. Some landholders who let out lands on cash rent wished their tenants to render service to them for a few days during festivals and seasons of sowing and harvesting. Others took to false measurements with rods shorter than the standard government pole of 8 cubits in length.

Such ill-dealings of the landholders and the revenue policy of the Government were at the roots of the agrarian movement in Assam. Consequently ⁱⁿ the sixties of the 19th century, agrarian movements, or uprisings were noticed in the form of Raii-Mel or Mels. The original village Panchayat transacting business on social matters, took over the role of popular assembly of the entire body of villagers for deciding and executing matters of common socio-economic interest.

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4. Krishnaram Bhattacharya was the first Parbatia Gossain because of the fact that he was first placed on the hillock of Kamakhya or Nilachala. The Ahom king Rudra Singha brought him from Malipota of Bengal to Assam by the year 1714 with the intention to become his disciple. But king Rudra Singh died before he became the disciple of Krishnaram. Rudra Singha's son and successor Siva Singh obeying the last wish of his father became the first disciple of Krishnaram.

The Raij-Mels aroused popular consciousness and confidence in the united strength of the peasants. In 1861 the peasants of Phulaguri area in the Nowgong District, mostly tribals, vehemently protested through their mels against the prohibition of poppy cultivation in that year and there were rumours of imposition of taxes on income and on areca nut and bettle vine. As the authorities paid no heed to the sentiments of the people one English officer, Lt. Singer, a Junior Assistant Commissioner, lost his life in his attempt to suppress the demonstrations made by the people in October 1861 in resentment. With the help of the military the uprising, known as "Phulaguri Dhawa" was suppressed and some eight tribal leaders were subsequently punished with death or transportation for life.

Though the Phulaguri uprising was suppressed, the role of Mels could not be minimised. The revenue policy of the Government was a source of constant worry and apprehension to the people, because periodical enhancement of revenue was not based upon any sound statistical data. In 1868 the rate of revenue in the Assam Valley Districts was doubled. There was consequently great discontent amongst the people which found expression through their Raij Mels, especially in the Districts of Kamrup and Darrang. The police dispersed the popular gatherings by show of force in places like Bazali in Kamrup District and Patharughat in Darrang District. But suppression of popular uprisings by force here and there gave further momentum to such agitations through Mels which began to play more important role. The

"Assam Riots" of 1893-94 reveal the extent to which the Raij Mel gave a severe jolt to the Imperial Power. They made the people conscious of their state of degradation. The Mels were active in districts of Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup. In the District of Kamrup this movement acquired particular intensity in Rangiya and Lochima (Sarukhetri Mouza) and in Patharughat in Mangaldoi Sub-Division of Darrang District. The people voiced their protest against the unjust enhancement of land revenue by 70-80 per cent which was imposed in 1893 during the Chief Commissionership of Sir W.E. Ward, under the plea that the assessment of 1873 had been lenient and that peoples' capacity to pay had not been fully taxed. In Kamrup the percentage of increase over the prevalent assessment was 54-58 per cent, the highest percentage being in Darrang, 60-79 per cent. It was natural that Kamrup and Darrang should protest vigorously against such arbitrary assessment. Thus a series of Raij-Mels were held in every nook and corner of all these districts in order to organise the people against alien authoritarianism. The Demonstrations of the people at places like Rangiya, Lachima, Patidarrang, Nalbari, Baroma, Bazali and the Mauzas of Upper Barbhag and Sarukhetri and Patharughat and their determination not to pay the enhanced revenue at any cost alarmed the authorities and they used force to suppress these popular uprisings which the Britishers called 'riots'. In December, 1893 and January 1894, demonstrations were held at Rangiya in the Kamrup District for several days by thousands of persons. On the 10th January 1894, Deputy Commissioner McCabe failing to disperse the

demonstrators by other means, ordered the military to open fire. The crowd ultimately dispersed. On the 21st January at Lachima some peasants assaulted the Mauzadar and the Mandal when the latter tried to collect some revenue. The Sub-Divisional Officer, who was present on the spot, arrested some 75 men in this connection only to be released when more than 3,000 people surrounded the camp and threatened to burn the Rest-house. By the 25th January some 59 of the principal leaders were arrested. At once a crowd of 6000 men assembled and demanded the release of the prisoners. Fearing that the Camp might be stormed, the Deputy Commissioner ordered his men to charge the crowd with fixed bayonets. After some tussle the crowd dispersed. People still remember the barbarity with which the authorities here sought to cower the people. There was a similar affray at Patharughat on the 28th January, 1894. The people assembled on the 28th, learning that the Deputy Commissioner would be coming, and might be induced to give them redress. Seeing the assembled crowd in the vast field near the Rest-house, where the Deputy Commissioner camped, he asked them to disperse. The people remained firm and refused to budge an inch unless their demands were conceded. Mr. Berington, the then Superintendent of Police, was then ordered to disperse them by force. The people became excited at the sight of the fixed bayonets when Mr. Berington drew up his men in battle order. The crowd pressed forward in spite of volleys of fire aimed at them and drew back only when scores of people lay dead or injured on the ground. The risings of 1893-94 caused a deep

stir throughout the Province and had their echo even in the Imperial Legislative Council of those days where Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, in a series of questions, questioned the propriety of the enhanced assessment of revenue in Assam and the measures adopted by the local authorities to suppress the popular risings. The Government had to give vague replies. Though such uprisings were suppressed to some extent by force, but these movements continued to be directed mainly against the oppression and injustice, meted out by the landlords.

The system failed to improve the lots of the tenants or under-tenants as was contemplated by the Government.⁵

The Mouzadars failed to carry out works of public utility, viz. construction of roads, establishment of schools, digging of ponds and the like which they were expected to execute under the Mauzadari System. Majority of the Mauzadars lacked in efficiency and ability. By making Mauzadars hereditary, not only did the tenants not get any benefit, but even the Government had to face many difficulties in realising full revenue in time due to the unscrupulous character of the mouzadars. Even though the mouzadars had to pay stipulated amount to the Government and could not realise more than the fixed rent from the ryots, sometimes they even collected double the amount of actual rent from the ryots.⁶

5. Sadiniya Assamiya (Weekly), Friday, 30th Asvin 1841, 17th October, 1919, Dibrugar, p.6.

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Due to the powers vested in them .

As these grievances of the ryots against Mouzadars were not redressed, they organised during 1930-31 a central organisation of the ryots called Assam Talatiya Ryot Sabha. The General Secretary of this Sabha was late Ganga Ram Choudhury. Many incidents regarding the oppression by the Mouzadars are found mentioned in his Diary. From this Diary and the contemporary Newspapers referred to above a vivid picture of the various oppressive acts of the Mouzadars against their ryots come to light. Some of these are:-

- (1) non-issuing of rent receipts by the Mouzadars, (2) non-specifying areas of land in the Rent receipt, if issued, (3) seiging the crop from paddy field and other movables on some pretext, etc.

These oppressive measures of the Mouzadars made their ryots to unite against them through the Ryot-Sabhas in various parts of the Province. Notable among these were:-

- (1) Talatiya Ryot Sabha of Geriki gaon of Darrang, (2) Sialmarigaon Ryot Sabha of Nambarbhag Mouza, (3) Namati Mouza Talatiya Ryot Sabha, (4) Dairang Talatiya Ryot Sabha, (5) Golaghat Ryot Sabha, (6) Dhekirkhowa Ryot Sabha, (7) Mangaldai Talatiya Ryot Sabha and (8) Chachani Mouza Ryot Sabha. All these Sabhas functioned under the Central body Assam Talatiya Ryot Sabha.

As a result of this movement the Government was compelled to introduce a bill in the Provincial Council.

The first proposal for introduction of the Assam Tenancy Act was moved in the Council by late Ruhini Kumar Ghoudhury, a member of the Council, as early as 1933 and he was supported by a few other members. The proposal was accepted and subsequently a bill was prepared. This bill was further amended as in ^{view of} the opinion of some of the Members of the Council. A fresh bill was introduced in its September (1934) Session. In the first bill there were 85 sections in 12 chapters covering 16 pages. But in the Second there were 123 Sections in 14 chapters covering 42 pages.

The Executive Members of the All Assam Talatiya Ryot Sabha, in their meeting held on 16th January 1934 at Bazali had passed a resolution asking all the members of the Council to protect the rights of the ryots when the bill would be introduced in the Council in its March (1934) Session.

Another meeting of this body was held on 4th September, 1934 when a fresh bill in this regard was introduced in the Council. This time again resolutions were passed asking the Members of the Council to endeavour to have the Tenancy Bill passed. The bill sent to a Select Committee in 1934 and published for public opinion. Some landholders of Kamrup District formed an Association called the 'Kamrup Landholders' Association' with the aim of opposing the

7. Tinidiniya Assamiya of 4th December, 1934.

8. Tinidiniya Assamiya, 2nd February, 1934.

9. Tinidiniya Assamiya of 1st Asvin 1856: 18th September, 1934, p.3.

Tenancy Bill. It was formed on 20th January 1935 in their meeting held in the Sanatan Dharmi Sabha Mandir. The meeting was presided over by Rai Bahadur Kalicharan Sen. By the Resolution No.6 passed at the meeting a Sub-Committee¹⁰ was formed to oppose the Tenancy Bill. Efforts were made to influence the Members of the Council. Landholders of other Districts joined them. In an article written by the late Ganga Ram Choudhury, the General Secretary of the Assam Talatiya Ryot Sabha, he tried to prove the baselessness of the apprehensions which the 'Landholders' Association'¹¹ put forward against the bill. Since the publication of the Tenancy Bill, series of meetings of all the branches of the Assam Talatiya Ryot Sabha and its Central body were held and in every meeting resolutions were passed asking the Government to pass the bill and requesting the Members of the Council to do their best so that the bill might become an Act.¹² The bill was discussed in the Meetings of the Council¹³ held on 6th-7th June, 1935 when it was formally passed and became an Act, under the title of Assam Tenancy Act 1935. Its jurisdiction extended over the Districts of Nowgong, Darrang, Lakshimpur, Sibsagar, Cachar and Kamrup.

The credit for the passing of the bill goes also to the then Governor of Assam Sir Michael Keane. The Act provides for checking the landholders from (1) collecting

10. Tinidiniya Assamiya, 29th January, 1935.

11. Tinidiniya Assamiya of 26th February, 1935.

12. Tinidiniya Assamiya of 1st and 22nd February, 10th and 21st May, 1935.

13. Tinidiniya Assamiya of 11th and 14th June, 1935.

undue rent by just showing notice of eviction, (2) evicting any ryot without any cause, (3) realising Sevakar and Mukhchawani, (4) taking cows, used in ploughing, from cow shed by force, (5) issuing illegible rent receipts, (6) collecting rent without issuing rent receipts and for waste land and ~~and~~ (7) preventing the ryots in digging ponds for drinking water. As the Act provides also for protection of the rights of the ryots, at least to some extent, it can rightly be said that it marked a new beginning in the history of the system of land tenure in Assam, and consequently it served as the forerunner ~~xxxxxxxx~~ of some other future Acts of the same nature with such advantageous clauses for the ryots.